

October 17, 2023

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, Chair
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Sen. John Boozman, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Rep. Glenn Thompson, Chair
Committee on Agriculture
400 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Rep. David Scott, Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
468 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Outdoor recreation in Farm Bill forestry, conservation, and rural development programs

Dear Chairs Stabenow and Thompson, and Ranking Members Boozman and Scott,

Thank you for you and your staff's work to write the next Farm Bill. This letter outlines the shared perspectives of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, the outdoor industry, and conservation-minded businesses on how the Farm Bill can support outdoor recreation and the nation's growing outdoor economy through its Forestry, Conservation, and Rural Development titles.

Outdoor recreation is an important driver of economic growth, having generated \$862 billion in economic output in 2021.¹ These benefits are particularly pronounced in rural communities that lie in the vicinity of high-quality recreation opportunities on both public and private lands. The Farm Bill has a long history of supporting rural economies and providing environmental benefits that are vital to the outdoor recreation experience. The 2018 Farm Bill acknowledged this connection between outdoor recreation and rural communities via conference report language clarifying that certain Rural Development funds can be used for

¹ Bureau of Econ. Analysis, BEA 22-55, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2021 (2022), available at <https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021>.

recreation-related purposes.² This language sets an important precedent for addressing recreation programs in the Farm Bill, which Congress can expand on in 2023 through separate Farm Bill titles including Forestry and Conservation.

Farm Bill programs affect outdoor recreation and the outdoor economy in a number of ways: conservation programs enhance clean waterways enjoyed by paddlers and other water-based recreationists; forestry programs support healthy, resilient forests which in turn provide important wildlife habitat and extraordinary scenic values; and rural development programs support recreation-related economic growth that helps rural communities thrive. Perhaps most importantly, the Farm Bill's investments in climate-smart agriculture are critical to meeting our nation's climate goals—a top priority for outdoor recreationists and outdoor business owners alike.

As your respective committees work to finalize the draft text for the next Farm Bill, we strongly support including the following bills:

- Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023 (S. 2631/H.R. 3424)
- Headwaters Protection Act of 2023 (S. 1853/H.R. 4018)
- Rural Outdoor Investment Act (S. 2604/H.R. 5052)
- Voluntary Public Access Improvement Act of 2032 (S. 1161/H.R. 5186)
- Transparency in Legacy Road and Trail Remediation Act of 2023 (introduction forthcoming)

In addition to the existing legislative proposals noted above, we also strongly recommend that your committees include the following proposals in the draft bill and associated committee reports:

- Maintain Inflation Reduction Act investments in climate-smart agriculture.
- Encourage the Forest Service to integrate outdoor recreation into forest health and wildfire resilience projects.
- Increase the pace and scale of forest restoration projects, including prescribed fire.

² See, H.R. REP. NO. 115-1072, at 677 (2018) (Conf. Rep.).

- Incorporate outdoor recreation into Rural Development programs, including through grant-awarding criteria.

These proposals are described in more detail in the sections below underneath the relevant Farm Bill title. Bill numbers are noted where legislation has already been introduced.

Forestry Title

Headwaters Protection Act of 2023 (S. 1853/H.R. 4018): The Headwaters Protection Act would reauthorize and strengthen two important forestry programs established in the 2018 Farm Bill: The Water Source Protection Program (WSPP) and the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF). The WSPP invests in forest restoration projects that protect water quality by enabling partnerships between the Forest Service and local governments, Tribes, nonprofit organizations, and other end water users. The Headwaters Protection Act would authorize additional appropriations for the WSPP and would expand the list of eligible end water users to include historically disadvantaged communities. The WCF establishes a science-based framework by which the Forest Service can evaluate watershed health and prioritize watershed restoration activities. The Headwaters Protection Act would improve the WCF by more clearly protecting the highest functioning watersheds—often the areas most valued by the outdoor recreation community.

Transparency in Legacy Road and Trail Remediation Act of 2023 (introduction forthcoming): The Forest Service's Legacy Roads & Trails program is critical for helping improve and decommission degraded roads to achieve water quality and habitat objectives across the agency's extensive road and trail system. This bill would improve transparency in how this program is administered by requiring each Forest Service region to publish a list of projects eligible for funding under the program each year and solicit public comments on project selection. This will provide stakeholders like outdoor recreationists with a needed opportunity to weigh in on potential Legacy Roads & Trails projects and will help ensure that funds expended through the program support the priorities of local communities.

Incorporate outdoor recreation into forest health projects: Our organizations support the Forest Service's goal of treating 50 million acres of forest lands in

western states over the next decade, as outlined in the agency's 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy.³ Multiple Farm Bill programs and investments will be critical to helping the agency and partners achieve this goal. As the agency works to increase the pace and scale of restoration, there is considerable opportunity to more thoroughly integrate outdoor recreation and recreation infrastructure into the design, implementation, and prioritization of wildfire resilience projects.⁴ To encourage this type of integration, the Conference Report for the 2018 Farm Bill included the following language:

“Additionally, the Managers intend that when designing restoration projects using the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 or under other authorities authorized in the Forestry title, the Secretary consider opportunities to restore sustainable recreational infrastructure or access, or to accomplish other recreation outcomes, where such opportunities are compatible with the primary restoration purpose(s) of the project.”⁵

We strongly encourage your committees to retain this language in the next Farm Bill and to consider including similar guidance in the legislative text of the bill.

Increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire: The outdoor recreation community is increasingly affected by severe wildfires and wildfire smoke. Prescribed fire is a critical fuels management and ecological restoration tool that is vastly underused, particularly in the western U.S. The Farm Bill should incorporate elements of the National Prescribed Fire Act of 2023 (introduction forthcoming) which proposes new programs, incentives, and key performance indicators aimed at increasing the pace, scale, and quality of prescribed fire treatments.

³ U.S. Dep't Of Agriculture, Forest Service, FS-1187a, Wildfire Crisis Strategy – Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America's Forests (2022), <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Confronting-Wildfire-Crisis.pdf>.

⁴ See, Jamie Ervin, Wildfire and Outdoor Recreation in the West: How Recreationists Can Support a Fire-Resilient Future, Policy Report, Outdoor Alliance, Washington, D.C., Page 18 (2023). Examples include designing projects to enhance scenic resources in popular recreation areas, exploring where trail networks can also serve as holding lines for prescribed burns, implementing thinning projects to enhance backcountry ski terrain, and more.

⁵ H.R. REP. NO. 115-1072, at 715 (2018) (Conf. Rep.).

Clarify the process for National Forest recreation closures: The Forest Service is increasingly closing access to a significant amount of public land in response to wildfires without a clear process for considering public input or planning to reopen public lands for recreational use. Many of these closures are left in place for months or even years after fires are out and sometimes cover large areas entirely unaffected by fire or that otherwise pose no genuine public safety or resource protection issue. These closures negatively affect recreation-dependent economies and community quality of life. The Farm Bill can address this issue by establishing a clear, collaborative process by which the agency can reopen areas to recreational use while providing for public safety and wildfire protection.

Conservation Title

Forest Conservation Easement Program Act of 2023 (S. 2631/H.R. 3424): Privately-owned forestlands are important for their conservation and climate benefits, as well as their role in supporting recreation access and scenic values. These forests also face significant development pressure, which threatens their ability to continue providing these benefits for present and future generations. The Forest Conservation Easement Program Act (FCEP) would expand the existing Healthy Forests Reserve Program to establish two new voluntary programs aimed at conserving privately-owned working forests. Our organizations strongly support mandatory funding for FCEP at \$100M/year as proposed by the House version of the bill.

Voluntary Public Access Improvement Act of 2032 (S. 1161/H.R. 5186): The VPA-HIP provides funding to states and tribal governments to encourage private landowners to allow public access to their lands for recreation and wildlife-related purposes. Our organizations strongly support S.1161/H.R. 5186, which would reauthorize and expand funding for this program to \$150 million over five years.

Maintain and strengthen Inflation Reduction Act climate investments: Ensure that conservation and climate-related investments from the Inflation Reduction Act are not reduced or diverted to other purposes through the Farm Bill. Important programs include the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and other investments in the Natural

Resources Conservation Service made through Sections 21001 and 21002 of the IRA.

Rural Development Title

Rural Outdoor Investment Act (S. 2604/H.R. 5052): The ROI Act would spur economic and entrepreneurial opportunities related to outdoor recreation in rural communities. This legislation would promote economic growth in rural areas by authorizing \$50 million annually for recreation-related economic development funding focused on outdoor recreation infrastructure, community planning, and business assistance for outdoor-related enterprises. The bill also educates communities and businesses about available federal resources that apply to outdoor recreation projects by fostering collaboration between the Economic Development Administration, USDA Rural Development, and the Small Business Administration. Finally, the bill authorizes funding for the existing Recreation Economy for Rural Communities grant program, which provides planning assistance grants to revitalize and strengthen communities through outdoor recreation.

Expand the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program to include recreation: This USDA Rural Development grant program provides funding for community facilities in rural areas. The language currently deems facilities used primarily for recreational purposes as ineligible. Expanding eligibility for this program to include trails, visitor centers, local parks, and other outdoor recreation infrastructure would better enable rural communities to realize the economic benefits of outdoor recreation and improve public health through the use of recreation infrastructure.

Update Rural Development grant programs to include outdoor recreation: Amend awarding criteria within grant programs to support projects and proposals that support outdoor recreation infrastructure or outdoor recreation-focused businesses in order to boost economic development while enhancing quality-of-life and promoting sustainable tourism in rural communities. Examples of these grant programs include Rural Business Development Grants, Rural Business-Cooperative Service Programs Technical Assistance Training, the Rural Microentrepreneur

Assistance Program, the Rural Innovation Stronger Economy Grant Program, and the Rural Business Investment Program.

Create an Outdoor Recreation Working Group within the Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development: An Outdoor Recreation Working Group could monitor and evaluate the impact of outdoor recreation programs on rural communities. The group would be responsible for several key tasks, such as reporting on rural efforts to promote outdoor recreation and conservation, creating a resource guide for states and communities, assessing grant criteria for outdoor recreation, identifying funding opportunities, and advising on outdoor recreation policies.

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The outdoor recreation community, outdoor industry, and conservation minded business appreciate your attention to the ways in which the Farm Bill can support recreation, conservation, and rural economic development, and we look forward to working with you towards a strong Farm Bill.

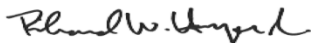
Best regards,



Louis Geltman
VP for Policy & Government Relations
Outdoor Alliance



Shoren Brown
Vice President, Public Affairs
The Conservation Alliance



Rich Harper
Director of Government Affairs
Outdoor Industry Association



Our Organizations

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

The Conservation Alliance is an organization of like-minded businesses whose collective contributions support grassroots environmental organizations and their efforts to protect wild places where outdoor enthusiasts recreate. Alliance funds have played a key role in protecting rivers, trails, wildlands and climbing areas. Membership in the Alliance is open to all companies who care about protecting our most threatened wild places for habitat and outdoor recreation. Since its inception in 1989, The Conservation Alliance has contributed more than \$21 million, helped to protect more than 51 million acres of wildlands; protect 3,107 miles of rivers; stop or remove 34 dams; designate five marine reserves; and purchase 14 climbing areas. For complete information on The Conservation Alliance, see www.conservationalliance.com.

Based in Boulder, Colorado, with offices in Washington, D.C., Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) is a catalyst for meaningful change. A member-based collective, OIA is a passionate group of business leaders, climate experts, policy makers, and outdoor enthusiasts committed to sustainable economic growth and climate positivity while protecting—and growing access to—the benefits of the outdoors for everyone. For more than 30 years, OIA has catalyzed a thriving outdoor industry by supporting the success of every member company across four critically aligned areas: market research, sustainability, government affairs, and inclusive participation. OIA delivers success for its members through education, events, and business services in the form of solutions and strategies, consultation, collaboration, and opportunities for collective action. For more information, visit outdoorindustry.org.